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ABSTRACT

A four-year private suburban college and a city public school district collaboratively provided teacher education courses to paraprofessionals working with special needs students in general education classes. The two teacher education courses, offered on the school district's premises, were Teaching, Learning, and Growth and Instructional Strategies and Classroom Management. A group of 28 teachers and administrators responded to a questionnaire about the job performance of 26 paraprofessionals who completed the courses, and 22 paraprofessionals who finished the courses also completed a questionnaire. The teacher/administrator questionnaire asked about their current position in the school, years of experience, awareness of the paraprofessional's enrollment in the course, and beliefs about change in the paraprofessional's behaviors related to working with students with disabilities. The paraprofessional questionnaire asked about educational background, current position, experience, and beliefs about course effectiveness and impact. In an essay, paraprofessionals discussed whether or not they responded differently to student behavior following the course. Results indicated that course participants had improved job performance and greater knowledge of course content and their occupational roles in the classroom. Participants believed they understood and responded to student behavior more appropriately since taking the courses. Many indicated an intention to continue college level study and pursue a career in teaching. (SM)

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Impact of Teacher Education Courses on Paraprofessionals' Job Performance, Knowledge, and Goals

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Abstract: Collaboration between a four-year private suburban college and a city public school district provided teacher education courses to paraprofessionals who were employed by the school district. Evaluation found that paraprofessionals who participated in teacher education courses appeared to demonstrate improved job performance and reported greater knowledge of course content and of their occupational roles in the classroom. Participants indicated intention to continue college-level study and pursue a career in teaching. The researchers concurred with other educators who have found collaborative programs an important influence in linking school and community, raising skill levels and earning power of paraprofessionals, and diversifying the workforce.

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Northeastern Educational Research Association, October 22, 1997.

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Impact of Teacher Education Courses on Paraprofessionals' Job Performance, Knowledge, and Goals

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Because inclusion of children with special educational needs is currently mandated, more and more children with special educational needs are being educated in the least restrictive environment within their school districts. The increasing population of children with special needs who are being educated in local school districts necessitates greater employment of teacher assistants to supplement teachers' roles and fulfill services in classrooms, lunchrooms, and playgrounds. Generally, teacher assistants have no formal preparation or training for the role they perform.

Collaboration between schools and colleges can be useful to clarify paraprofessionals' functions, improve their job retention within local schools, and provide for career mobility by developing educational programs to smooth transition into teaching (Pickett, 1995). Collaborative educational programs have been found to be an important influence in linking school and community, raising skill levels and earning power of paraprofessionals, and diversifying the workforce (Haselkorn, 1996).

A collaboration between the New York Institute of Technology (NYIT) and Long Beach City School District (CSD) was established to help currently employed teaching assistants fulfill a requirement for college-level credit so they may attain certification. The college provided administrative services and instruction to paraprofessionals at reduced tuition; the district provided the site and subsidized costs. The collaboration eased the burdens of expense, travel-time, and logistics for participating paraprofessionals.

NYIT professors offered two teacher education courses consecutively on the school district's premises. The courses were *Education 2212: Teaching, learning, and growth* and *Education 2293: Instructional strategies and classroom management*. The courses were designed to provide teacher assistants with critical knowledge and intervention techniques they needed to work with students with special educational needs and also to provide participants with general instruction as to how they may fulfill their specialized role in supporting the classroom teachers.

The courses covered the full syllabus of a regular college course in a time period, although identical in number of hours to the college course, condensed into a shorter time frame. Specifically, the courses met for two full sessions per week during one-half the traditional college semester, instead of one full session per week for a full-semester.

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Videotaped presentations focusing on specific classroom situations were used (in addition to a textbook) to raise important issues for clarification through study and discussion. Videotapes demonstrated strategies and methods for managing student learning, social and personal behavior, and classroom environment while providing a basis for developing the paraprofessionals' understanding of context and concepts. Visual presentations were an important teaching methodology for at least two reasons: (1) to provide views of activities, behaviors, interactions, and roles to paraprofessionals who were not assigned to classrooms, and (2) to allow paraprofessionals to view situations at all grade levels, i.e., those at the primary levels could consider situations at the upper elementary and secondary levels; those at the secondary levels could view settings at the lower grades; all could consider situations in the mainstream and special education settings.

Particularly because this was a new program, both NYIT faculty and Long Beach CSD personnel supported evaluation to assess impact and to plan future directions. A three-part evaluation considered teachers' and administrators' observations of the paraprofessionals' job performance, paraprofessionals' reflections on the effect that participation had upon their understanding of and response to children's behavior, and paraprofessionals' assessments of the courses and comments about their impact upon their own goals.

Methodology

Participants

The researchers obtained perceptions of 28 educators and 26 paraprofessionals concerning the impact of program participation on paraprofessionals' job performance, knowledge, and goals.

Educators

Twenty-eight teachers and administrators completed a two-page questionnaire relating to the job performance of "their" 26 paraprofessionals who participated in the program. Respondents included 17 teachers, six principals, three special education teachers, and two librarians/library media specialists. The 100 percent response rate suggested that the educators were supportive of the NYIT-Long Beach CSD collaboration that enabled a cohort group of paraprofessionals to complete teacher education courses group at a reduced tuition rate at a Long Beach facility.

Most of the educators' grade level responsibilities were at the preschool and elementary grades. Approximately one-fifth of the respondents worked at pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels; one-tenth worked at grades 1-3. The remaining one-half of respondents included the k-5 levels (two-fifths) and either grades 5-12 or grades 9-12 (one tenth).

One-half of the respondents (11 teachers and three administrators) had more than five years of experience at Long Beach CSD in their current positions. Approximately one-fifth each were in their first year (including both library teachers) or in their second or third years (including one principal). Two principals were in their fourth or fifth years.

Four-fifths of the educators were aware that the paraprofessionals about whom they were responding had been enrolled in the college-level teacher education course. All the elementary teachers and library personnel were aware of the paraprofessionals' participation in the teacher education courses. Several of the principals and one teacher at the 9-12 level were not aware of the paraprofessionals' participation in the teacher education courses.

The 26 paraprofessionals about whom educators reported included teacher assistants (80 percent) and cafeteria aides with lunchroom and playground responsibilities (20 percent).

Paraprofessionals

Twenty-two paraprofessionals responded to a questionnaire -- they represented all 19 paraprofessionals who completed *Education 2212:Teaching, learning, and growth*, and 85 percent of the 26 paraprofessionals who completed *Education 2293:Instructional Strategies and Classroom Management*. (An increased number of participants may have reflected feedback from participating paraprofessionals to their peers, encouraging seven additional adults to enroll in the second course offering.) Nineteen paraprofessionals explained that they enrolled in these courses because they required college credits to maintain their current jobs. Four respondents stated that they took these courses because the program was convenient, and four expressed their desire for professional improvement.

Respondents included 18 teaching assistants, four cafeteria aides, and one substitute teaching assistant/cafeteria aide (78 percent, 18 percent, and 4 percent respectively). Twenty-six participants completed the evaluative essay. (The job assignments of the additional three paraprofessionals were not identified.)

The current year was the first year of employment in the Long Beach schools for 57 percent of the respondents. Twenty-six percent of the paraprofessionals had worked in the district between two to three years, 4 percent had worked in the district between four and five years, and 13 percent had worked in Long Beach for more than five years. Approximately 70 percent worked at the elementary levels. The other paraprofessionals assisted in the computer lab, the library, grades 10-12, and in the cafeteria and playground.

All the respondents had earned a high-school diploma. One respondent with education beyond a high school diploma had previously completed a nursing program.

The ethnic and racial composition of teacher assistants reflected the school population. Approximately two-thirds of the paraprofessionals were Caucasian, and one-third were members of ethnic and racial minority groups (five Latinas and two African Americans).

The participants indicated that they had direct experience in the classroom, felt success ful in the school environment, and had ties in the community. They lacked funds to pay for college courses, lacked confidence about their academic skills, lacked knowledge about appropriate courses, and felt pressed for time.

Instrumentation

A two-page questionnaire elicited teachers' and administrators' background and observations. Respondents identified their current position in the school and their total years of experience at Long Beach CSD in the current position. Respondents indicated whether they were aware of their assigned paraprofessionals' enrollment in the course, and they assessed the extent to which they had noticed a change in the behaviors or understanding of "their paraprofessional" in the following areas: responsiveness to students' physical needs, responsiveness to students' psychological needs, appropriate methods used with children, appropriate skills, knowledge/understanding of curriculum materials, impact in the classroom, interacting with parents, motivating students, teacher-student relationships, student-peer relationships, student motivation, behavior management, student on-task behavior, and dealing with disruptive behavior. Ratings of perceived change were based on a 5-point scale from 1 (much worse) to 5 (much better). In addition, the respondents were asked to rate the extent to which their overall satisfaction with the paraprofessional improved, and whether they believed that participation in the teacher education course had helped the assistant to become more "professional." Finally, respondents were invited to comment generally concerning the NYIT courses and to offer recommendations for future courses.

Paraprofessionals completed a four-page questionnaire eliciting their educational background, current position, and experience, and ratings of class effectiveness for course assessment on multiple criteria, and course impact. Respondents rated the extent to which they learned various content modules for each course. Open-ended items invited additional comments on why they took the teacher education courses, what they perceived as the courses' strengths and weaknesses, whether they became more professional in their current role, whether participation affected their thoughts about becoming a teacher, and recommendations for future college courses. To avoid confusion, the format for eliciting ratings (a 4-point scale from 1 [poor] to 4 [excellent]) conformed with Long Beach Central School District's in-service course-work evaluation guidelines.

Additionally, at a separate session, 26 participants responded anonymously in a brief essay to the following question: "Reflecting on what you have learned in this class, do you understand and respond to children's behavior differently in the classroom, lunchroom, or playground? Can you provide an example?"

Responses to questionnaire items were reported using descriptive statistics.

Results

Performance

Based on data obtained from educators who worked with the participating paraprofessionals and directly from the paraprofessionals themselves, it appeared that the paraprofessionals' course experience led to an ability to transfer their learning into the classroom, lunchroom, and playground, and resulted in behaviors and attitudes that supported a positive, nurturing setting for children.

Educators' perceptions

For every specified criterion, the paraprofessionals' behaviors and understandings were perceived by the teachers and administrators to have improved "over the past several months." These perceived improvements were simultaneous to and possibly associated with participation in the teacher education courses. None of the respondents indicated that the paraprofessionals' behaviors or understandings had worsened over the past several months. Perceptions of "no change" were reported on all criteria for a range of about 15 percent to 25 percent of the paraprofessionals.

Specifically, 85 percent of the teachers and administrators rated the paraprofessionals as "better" or "much better" on each of the following criteria:

-- responsive to students' physical needs,
-- responsive to students' psychological needs,
-- appropriate methods used with children,
-- appropriate skills,
-- knowledge/understanding of curriculum materials, and
-- teacher student relationships.

Eighty percent of the teachers and administrators rated the paraprofessionals "better" or "much better" on the following:

-- student on-task behavior,
-- impact in the classroom,
-- dealing with disruptive behavior,
-- motivating students,
-- behavior management, and
-- student motivation.

Approximately 25 percent of the teachers and administrators rated the paraprofessionals "better" or much better in their knowledge and understanding of student-peer relationships and interacting with parents. (Notably, one-fourth of the respondents did not indicate a rating for the criteria "interacting with parents"; paraprofessionals did not conduct this role.)

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Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and percentages for ratings by certified educators of the extent of change perceived in paraprofessionals' behaviors and understandings.

Table 1

Extent of Change in Paraprofessionals Behaviors and Understandings

paraprofessional behaviors	mean	sd	much worse (1)	(2)	no change (3)	(4)	much better (5)
responsive to students' physical needs	4.5	.72	0	0	13	29	58
responsive to students' psychological needs	4.5	.76	0	0	15	23	62
appropriate methods used with children	4.4	.75	0	0	15	31	54
appropriate skills	4.4	.75	0	0	15	35	50
knowledge/understanding of curriculum materials	4.4	.25	0	0	15	31	54
teacher-student relationships	4.4	.75	0	0	15	31	54
student on-task behavior	4.4	.80	0	0	19	23	58
unpact in the classroom	4.4	.80	0	0	19	23	58
dealing with disruptive behavior	4.4	.81	0	0	20	24	56
motivating students	4.3	.79	0	0	20	32	48
behavior management	4.3	.80	0	0	20	28	52
student motivation	4.2	.76	0	0	20	40	40
student-peer relationships	4.2	.83	0	0	27	31	42
interacting with parents	4.1	.79	0	0	25	40	35

Educators' ratings of "overall satisfaction" with the paraprofessionals documented a high level of performance by the paraprofessionals who were enrolled in the teacher education courses. The mean rating for overall satisfaction was 4.5 (sd. = 0.76) on a 5-point rating scale.

Seventy-five percent of the educators perceived increased professionalism of the paraprofessionals as an outcome of participation in the courses. Nine educators remarked that the paraprofessionals were excellent. Other comments referred to paraprofessionals' increased

understanding (5), their application of newly-learned strategies in the classroom (4), paraprofessionals' increased initiative in assuming responsibility (2), increased attention to students' needs (2), and increased confidence (1).

Paraprofessionals' perceptions

Respondents unanimously believed that participating in the teacher education courses had taught them to understand and respond differently to children's behavior in the classroom, lunchroom, or playground. Fifteen respondents stated that, as a direct result of the course, they were aware of more strategies and procedures. Twelve paraprofessionals wrote that they understood children better. Six stated that they were more patient with the children. Five paraprofessionals provided examples of ways in which they worked with individual children. The paraprofessionals reported a variety of strategies that they now used; strategies included appropriate touching, downplaying misbehavior, listening to children "differently," setting rules early, helping children to think though behavior, modulating their tone of voice, kneeling to children's level, giving children opportunity to settle their own disputes, providing alternative choices, encouraging peer interaction, using praise, assigning jobs, allowing independence, using star charts, and personal sharing. Table 2 presents paraprofessionals' comments concerning the courses' impact on their performance.

Table 2

Paraprofessionals' Description of Impact of Course Leanings

Impact	n	Impact	n
aware of more strategies and procedures	15	aware of tone of voice	3
understand children better	11	kneels to child's level	3
more patient	6	allows children to settle their own disputes	2
grateful for the class	5	provides alternative choices	2
supports and guides individual students	5	provides a safer environment	2
touches or pats children	4	finds the course helpful at home also	2
ignores/downplays/ does not reward misbehavior	4	encourages peer interaction	1
listens to children differently	3	uses praise	1
sets rules in the beginning	3	assigns jobs	1
feels more in control	4	allows independence	1
helps children think though behavior	3	uses star charts	1
		shares more about own life	1

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The paraprofessionals were unanimous in the opinion that participation in the teacher education courses helped them to become more professional in their current roles. All 16 persons who responded to this item stated that their professionalism had been enhanced. Some respondents were emphatic in expressing their opinions, adding comments such as "Absolutely," "Very much so," and "I am more understanding of the children's needs."

Knowledge

The paraprofessionals reported that the courses provided much knowledge. A typical comment was, "The class was very informative and provided us with information that we can put to use every day."

The paraprofessionals reported that the courses had emphasized teamwork and communication with teachers and classmates and used excellent learning materials such as "(showing a) movie to go with thrust of the chapters." Paraprofessionals appreciated the advantage in taking courses in the district setting and with peers. One respondent stated this last as follows: "We were all here for the same reasons. It made it easier to learn and [we]were comfortable with the group."

Cooperative learning was employed in both classes as an instructional method. The instructors modeled the facilitator's role while they enhanced the participants' understanding.

Course ratings: The courses received high ratings from the paraprofessionals on all specified criteria. Virtually all the respondents rated the knowledge and expertise of the instructors as excellent. All the other criteria were considered excellent or good by the large majority of respondents in both courses. Table 3 presents paraprofessionals' ratings of the teacher education courses on all the specified criteria including knowledge and expertise of the instructors, usefulness of skills taught, continuity of modules and activities, appropriateness of methods learned, adequate variety of materials, comprehensiveness of content, responsiveness of the instructors to participants, relevance to needs, impact of materials, scheduling of sessions, use of relevant examples and demonstrations, appropriateness of methods used to teach the class, adequacy of feedback, and appropriate pacing of material.

Table 3

Paraprofessionals Ratings for Teacher Education Courses

	excellent (4)	good (3)	fair (2)	poor (1)	not applicable	mean rating	sd
knowledge and expertise of instructors	82%	18%	0%	0%	0%	3.8	.39
usefulness of skills taught	75	20	5	0	0	3.7	.55
comprehensiveness of content	61	34	5	0	0	3.6	.59
relevance to needs	59	34	5	0	2	3.6	.59
methods learned	66	27	7	0	0	3.6	.62
variety of materials	66	25	7	0	2	3.6	.62
responsiveness of instructor to participants	68	23	9	0	0	3.6	.66
overall satisfaction	61	32	7	0	0	3.5	.63
impact of materials	59	30	11	0	0	3.5	.70
adequacy of feedback	59	27	14	0	0	3.5	.73
relevant examples and demonstrations	66	23	9	2	0	3.5	.76
scheduling of sessions	57	36	2	5	0	3.5	.76
methods used to teach the class	55	34	11	0	0	3.4	.70
pacing of material	55	29	16	0	0	3.4	.75

Participants' Ratings of Their Learning: The paraprofessionals used a 4-point rating scale to indicate the extent to which they believed that they had learned various content modules for both courses as a result of participating in the NYIT classes. A rating of 4 meant "feel confident in my understanding and can begin to apply concepts"; 3 meant "became familiar/comfortable with it", 2 meant "know more about it"; and 1 meant "did not learn at all. " (Respondents were instructed to indicated "N" if a module was not applicable.)

Content modules for *Education 2212: Teaching, learning, and growth* included motivation, teaching and learning styles, understanding myself, information processing, evaluation, behavior of effective teachers, self concept, observing students and teachers, adolescent years, moral reasoning, cognitive growth, and theory and psychological models.

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Content modules for *Education 2293: Instructional strategies and classroom management included* creating positive teacher-student relationships, school-wide behavior management, dealing with disruptive behavior, increasing on-task behavior, students' personal and psychological needs, creating positive peer relationships, behavior management models, student motivation, social and school factors influencing student behavior, and working with parents.

The paraprofessionals indicated that they had learned much in all the various content modules set forth in the course curriculum; mean ratings ranged from 3.0 to 3.9 on a 4-point scale. Thus, participants, indicated confidence in their understanding and familiarity with concepts that were introduced. Table 4 presents paraprofessionals' ratings for their learning of content modules for *Education 2212: Teaching, learning, and growth.* Table 5 presents paraprofessionals' ratings for their learning of content modules for *Education 2293: Instructional strategies and classroom management.*

Table 4

Paraprofessionals Ratings for Their Learning of Content Modules for *Education 2212: Teaching, learning, and growth*

	Feel confident (4)	Comfortable familiar (3)	Learned more (2)	Did not learn (1)	NA	Mean	sd
motivation	86%	14%	0%	0%	0%	3.9	.36
teaching and learning styles	76	24	0	0	0	3.7	.36
understanding myself	76	19	5	0	0	3.7	.56
information processing	76	14	10	0	0	3.7	.66
evaluation	62	38	0	0	0	3.6	.50
behavior of effective teachers	62	38	0	0	0	3.6	.50
continuity of modules and activities	65	25	5	0	5	3.6	.51
self concept	67	28	5	0	0	3.6	.59
observing students and teachers	6	32	54	0	8	3.6	.61
adolescent years	62	24	14	0	0	3.5	.75
moral reasoning	65	18	9	4	4	3.5	.89
cognitive growth theory and	48	48	4	0	0	3.4	.60
psychological models	60	20	20	0	0	3.4	.82

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Table 5

Paraprofessionals Ratings for Their Learning of Content Modules for *Education 2295: Instructional strategies and classroom management*

	Feel confident (4)	Comfortable familiar (3)	Learned more (2)	Did not learn (1)	NA	Mean	sd
creating positive teacher-student relationships	44%	52%	4%	0%	0%	3.4	.58
school-wide behavior management	35	44	4	17	0	3.4	.60
dealing with disruptive behavior	43	48	9	0	0	3.4	.65
increasing on-task behavior	48	44	8	0	0	3.4	.66
students' personal and psychological needs	39	52	9	0	0	3.3	.64
creating positive peer relationships	48	39	13	0	0	3.3	.71
behavior management models	48	35	17	0	0	3.3	.77
student motivation	52	26	22	0	0	3.3	.82
social and school factors influencing student behavior	30	52	18	0	0	3.1	.69
working with parents	22	35	4	9	30	3.0	.97

The paraprofessionals' answers to open-ended items confirmed and clarified their quantitative responses. All the participants reported that participation in the courses enabled them to become more "professional" in their current roles.

Goals

Ten paraprofessionals indicated that they did not intend to become teachers. Nine participants (One-third) indicated that as a consequence of participating in the teacher education courses they were considering matriculation in a degree program leading to teacher certification. Seven of the nine paraprofessionals who were reconsidering their career goals attributed their shift in perspective directly to participation in the college course. One respondent articulately stated, "Taking the course has definitely sparked an interest for me. I would love to pursue this path I find myself on and see where it takes me."

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Attributing a shift in career goals to participation in teacher education courses provided to paraprofessionals within the district in which they are employed suggests that this strategy may be an effective means of recruiting teachers from disadvantaged and minority populations.

The college/school partnership provided teacher education to a group of mature adults who already were experienced and successful in the school environment. Should this population decide to continue the program and pursue a teaching degree, it is likely that many of the individuals within this population would succeed as teachers.

Conclusions

It is clear that the participants had the ability to benefit from college-level courses even though the courses were their first college-level experience. Educators' and paraprofessionals' assessments and qualitative reflections on the effect that on-site college-level teacher education had upon paraprofessionals' understanding and responses to children's behavior suggest a possible link between the course experience and paraprofessionals' developing awareness of strategies and procedures and enhanced understanding of children.

The study was limited in its design and sample: the study lacked a comparison group and was implemented on a self-selected sample in a district with a highly supportive administration and community. Nevertheless, data provided evidence supporting the program's effectiveness. The NYIT/Long Beach collaboration helped individual participants to develop personally and professionally, while the district upgraded the competence and effectiveness of its paraprofessionals and the college gained enrollment of highly motivated undergraduate students and involvement with the educational community. The researchers concluded that paraprofessionals' course experience and their ability to transfer their new knowledge into the classroom, lunchroom, and playground resulted in attitudes, behaviors, and new professional insight that supported a positive, nurturing setting in which children could learn and thrive. These observations support plans for continuation of the college/school district collaboration that provided teacher education courses to paraprofessionals.

The findings were consistent with suggestions by previous researchers that paraprofessionals are a fertile population for teacher recruitment. The researchers concurred with other educators who have found collaborative programs an important influence in linking school and community, raising skill levels and earning power of paraprofessionals, and diversifying the workforce.

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